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# Who is You? (Work Station Two)

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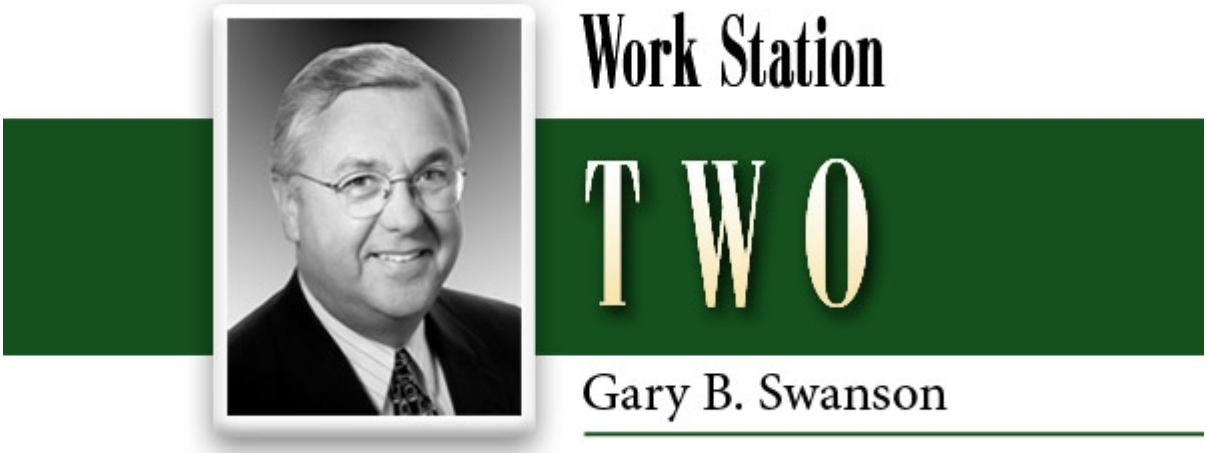


# Who Is You?

In a stimulating March 31, 2011, BBC podcast of the radio program *In Our Time*, host Melvyn Bragg interviewed three university professors of comparative religion on the topic of the *Bhagavad Gita,* the 700-verse core of the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata,* a revered text in the Hindu faith.

And, as would be expected, central to this discussion theologically is the topic of reincarnation. An excerpt of the program transcript, edited somewhat, goes something like this:

"The West," one panelist says, "is constantly thinking about heaven, getting to an eternal life. In India, people already had eternal life. You have more lives than you wanted to have if you are going to continue to be reincarnated again and again. After the first million times, it's perhaps not the 'be all and end all.'"

"It's also a philosophically important topic," another guest adds, "because when you say you are reincarnated, the question is, 'Who'?"

"Who is '*you*'?" Bragg asks, rhetorically.

"You are born in a particular life," the guest continues by way of explanation. "You have a life, and you die. That's your personal identity. What passes through a cycle of life can't be

*you*. You could have been your grandfather or the rabbit your grandfather ate, as it were. . . . It's the *being* that underlies these bursts of life. . . ."

"Reincarnation for Hindus is not a desirable thing," another scholar points out. "It's a miserable thing."

"Is it evidence of failure?" Bragg asks.

"It's evidence of failure in one respect: that you haven't actually achieved. This world is called . . . an 'abode of sorrow.'"

Fundamentally, the Christian would likely agree with this concept of distress in life. Believing that we live in a fallen world that sees its only hope in the direct intervention and sacrifice of its own Creator can at times seem very much like an abode of sorrow. The Christian sense of self begins with a recognition of its human inadequacy.

"Because this is a fallen world and we are fallen creatures," writes Matthew Eppinette, "we are estranged spiritually from God and subject physically to despair, disease, and death. In addition, we are in active rebellion against God. We suppress the truth, and are subject to spiritual blindness."[1]

In many respects, too, these few observations about the subject of reincarnation address many of the basic questions of human existence for which all faiths seek answers. And one of these is "Who am I?"—or "Who is 'you'?" In other words, "What does it mean to be human?"

Thinkers of various faiths throughout the centuries have pondered the question. Twice the psalmist, obviously a theist, asks the question, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (8:4),[2] or "take knowledge of him?" (144:3).

And this issue—the nature of humanity—is very much in the public discourse of our time. It is a theological topic, but even the most ardent 21st century materialist has become engaged in it because of advances in science and technology. Some are beginning to assert that the very nature of humanity is in a state

of flux, that we are becoming "transhuman."

"I was born human," writes Kevin Warwick, researcher and professor at the University of Reading (England). "This was merely due to the hand of fate acting at a particular place and time. But while fate made me human, it also gave me the power to do something about it. The ability to change myself, to upgrade my human form, with the aid of technology. To become cyborg—part human, part machine. . . . The next evolutionary step for humankind."[3]

Warwick, a researcher in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics, deep-brain stimulation, and cybernetics, is best known for "Project Cyborg," in which he has had chips and sensors implanted in his arm to begin the process of becoming a cyborg, i.e., a being with both biological and technological parts. This concept has been a staple of science fiction for many years, but Warwick's goal is to make it real. In successive stages, the technology in his arm, connected directly to his own organic neural system, has enabled him to control doors, lights, heaters, and other nearby computer-controlled devices.

Dubbed by the popular media "Captain Cyborg," Warwick has become one of the most outspoken proponents of transhumanism, a worldview that proclaims our entry into a transitional stage between being human and what they call "posthuman." And this has prompted concern and debate over many ethical—and theological—issues.

At the base of this new thought is full acceptance that technology is inherently good, that virtually anything that *can* be done *should* be done. There is scarce recognition of the existence of evil. The only prohibition would be to those projects that could damage or wipe out intelligent life. There is the utmost faith in human judgment. Salvation is provided in the inevitable march of human achievement to the point that a "singularity" will usher in a new phase of human existence. Posthumanity is the anticipated

eternal life; immortality will be attained through "uploading," a process of transferring one's human self into a computer.

Theologian James A. Herrick has authored a stimulating book entitled *Scientific Mythologies,* utilizing the definition of "mythology" as a worldview that answers the larger questions of human existence. In this book, he argues that science as it is practiced today—and science fiction, as its extension—has produced its own answers to these existential questions, such as the nature of humanity.

"Any story," Herrick writes, "suggesting that an improved human being is either desirable or inevitable—an evolved second Adam, crafted in our image—stands as a challenge to the Judeo-Christian theology's conception of both God and humanity. And yet, no idea is more central to contemporary dreams of both science fiction and speculative science than is a New Humanity, the inevitable consequence of directed evolutionary 'progress.'"[4]

"We simply are not capable of creating," Herrick adds, "through any sort of education or technology, a race of people morally superior to ourselves. . . . The Myth of a New Humanity counterfeits the Christian vision of a redeemed human race."[5]

God has offered to us a very clear vision of eternal life—poles apart from that of the Hindu *and* from that of the posthumanist. Each of these other two "faiths," one ancient and the other recent, draw ultimately from the original deception: "'You will not surely die'" (Gen. 3:4). For them, humanity is its own savior. We redeem ourselves. We work out our own destiny.

But the Christian's ultimate view of the "abode of sorrow" is to end in the greatest gift imaginable. And the Christian's answer to "Who is '*you'?"* is that *you* are a child of God, created in His image, greatly treasured by Him, redeemed only through His astonishing grace, and looking forward with utmost confidence to being with Him throughout eternity.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Matthew Eppinette, “Human 2.0,” in Kevin Vanhoozer, et al., ed., *Everyday Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 200.

2. All Scripture texts are quoted from the *New King James Version.*

3. Kevin Warwick, *I, Cyborg* (London: Century, 2002), p. 1.

4. James A. Herrick, *Scientific Mythologies* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 127.

5. Ibid., pp. 128, 129.